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FIREFIGHT

THE RECKONERS BOOK TWO

CHAPTER SAMPLER

FIREFIGHT

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KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK....

PROLOGUE

I watched Calamity rise.

I was six years old then, standing in the night on the balcony of our apartment. I can still remember how the old air conditioner rattled in the window next to me, covering the sound of my father's crying. The overworked machine hung with its rear end out over a plummet of many stories, dripping water like perspiration from the forehead of a suicidal jumper. The machine was broken; it blew air but didn't make anything cold. My mother had frequently turned it off.

After her passing, my father left it on; he said he felt cooler with it running.

I lowered my half-eaten popsicle and squinted at that strange red light, which rose like a new star above the horizon. Only no star

had ever been that bright or that *red*. Crimson. It looked like a bullet wound in the dome of heaven itself.

On that night, Calamity had blanketed the entire city in a strange warm glow. I stood there—popsicle melting, sticky liquid dripping down my fingers—as I watched the entire ascent.

Then the screaming had started.

CHAPTER ONE

“DAVID?” The voice came from my earpiece.

I shook myself out of my reverie. I'd been staring at Calamity again, thinking. But more than twelve years had passed since Calamity's rise. I wasn't a kid at home with my father any longer. I wasn't even an orphan working the munitions factory in the understreets.

I was a Reckoner.

“Here,” I answered, shouldering my rifle and crossing the rooftop. It was night, and I swore I could see a red cast to everything from Calamity's light, though it had never again appeared as bright as it had that first night.

Downtown Newcago spread out before me, surfaces reflecting starlight. Everything was steel here. Like a cyborg from the future

with the skin ripped off. Only, you know, not murderous. Or, well, alive at all.

Man, I thought. I really do suck at metaphors.

Steelheart was dead now, and we had reclaimed Newcago's upper streets—including many amenities the elite had once reserved for themselves. We had access to not only refrigeration but also running water. I could take a shower every day in my own bathroom. I almost didn't know what to do with such luxury. Other than, you know, not stink.

Newcago, at long last, was free.

It was my job to make sure it stayed that way.

"I don't see anything," I whispered, kneeling beside the edge of the rooftop. I wore an earpiece that connected wirelessly to the mobile that was stuck to the upper left sleeve of my jacket. A small camera on the earpiece allowed Tia to dial into a view of what I was seeing, and the earpiece was sensitive enough to pick up what I said, even when I spoke very softly.

"Keep watching," Tia said over the line. "Cody reports that Prof and the mark went your direction."

"It's quiet here," I whispered. "Are you sure—"

The rooftop exploded beside me. I yelped, throwing myself backward as the entire building shook, the blast spraying bits of broken metal across me. Calamity! Those shots packed a *punch*.

"Sparks!" Cody yelled over the line. "She got around me, lad. Coming up on your north side—"

His voice was drowned out as another glowing pulse of energy shot up from the ground and ripped the side off the rooftop near where I hid.

"Run!" Tia yelled.

Like I needed to be told. I got moving. To my right, a figure materialized out of light. Dressed in a black jumpsuit and sneakers, Sourcefield wore a full-face mask—like a ninja might wear—and

a long black cape. Some Epics bought into the whole “inhuman powers” thing more than others. Honestly, she looked ridiculous, even if she did glow faintly blue and crackle with energy spreading across her body.

She could travel through solid mater. It wasn’t true teleportation, but close enough. If she touched something, she could transform into energy and travel through it. The more conductive the substance, the farther she could travel.

A city made of steel was kind of like paradise for her. It was actually surprising that it had taken her so long to get here. And as if teleportation weren’t enough, her electrical abilities also made her impervious to most weapons and let her throw out energy blasts. The light shows she gave off were famous; I’d never seen her in person before, but I’d always wanted to see her work.

Just not from so close up.

“Scramble the plan!” Tia ordered. “Prof? Jon! Report in! Abraham?”

I listened with only a half an ear as a globe of crackling electricity whizzed by me. I skidded to a stop and dashed the other way as a second globe passed right through where I’d been standing. That one hit the rooftop, causing another explosion, making me stumble. Broken bits of metal sprayed my back as I scrambled to the side of the building.

Then I leaped off.

I didn’t fall far before hitting the balcony of the penthouse apartment. Heart pounding, I shoved in through the open balcony door, rifle over my shoulder.

A plastic cooler waited by the door. I threw open the lid and fished inside, trying to remain calm.

Sourcefield had come to Newcago earlier in the week. She’d started killing immediately—arbitrary people, no purpose behind it. Just like Steelheart had done in his early days. Then she’d started

calling out for the people to turn in the Reckoners so she could bring justice to us.

A twisted brand of Epic justice. They killed whomever they wanted, but to strike back was an offense so great, they could barely conceive it. Well, she'd see soon enough. So far, our plan to bring her down wasn't going terribly well, but we were the Reckoners. We prepared for the unexpected.

From the cooler, I pulled out a water balloon.

This, I thought, had better work.

Tia and I had debated Sourcefield's weakness for days. Every Epic had at least one, and often they were random. You had to research an Epic's history, the things they avoided, to try to figure out what substance or situation might negate their powers.

This balloon contained our best guess as to Sourcefield's weakness. I turned, hefting the balloon, watching the window and waiting for her to come down after me.

"David?" Tia asked over the earpiece.

"Yeah?" I whispered, anxious, balloon ready to throw.

"Why are you watching the window?"

Why was I . . .

Oh, right. Sourcefield could travel through walls.

Feeling like an idiot, I jumped backward just as Sourcefield came down through the ceiling, electricity buzzing all around her. She hit the floor and went down on one knee, hand out, a ball of electricity growing there, casting frantic shadows across the room.

Feeling nothing but a spike of adrenaline, I hurled the balloon. It hit Sourcefield right in the chest, and her energy blast fizzled into nothing. Red liquid from the balloon splashed on the walls and floor around her. Too thin to be blood, it was an old powdered fruit drink you mixed with water and sugar. I remembered it from childhood.

And it was her weakness.

Heart thumping, I unslung my rifle. Sourcefield stared at her dripping torso as if in shock, though the black mask she wore kept me from seeing her expression. Lines of electricity still worked across her body like tiny glowing worms.

I leveled the rifle and pulled the trigger. The crack of gunfire all but deafened me indoors, but I delivered a bullet directly at Sourcefield's face.

That bullet exploded as it passed through her energy field. Even soaked with the Kool-Aid, her protections worked.

She looked at me, her electricity flaring to life—growing more violent, more dangerous, lighting the room like a calzone stuffed with dynamite.

Uh-oh . . .

CHAPTER TWO

I scrambled into the hall as the doorway exploded behind me. The blast threw me face first into the wall, and I heard a crunch.

On one hand, I was relieved. The crunching sound meant that Prof was still alive—his Epic abilities granted me a protective field. On the other hand, an evil, angry killing machine was chasing me.

I pushed myself back from the wall and dashed down the metal hallway, which was lit by my mobile, shining on my arm. *Zip line*, I thought, frantic. *Which way? Right, I think.*

“I found Prof,” Abraham’s voice said in my ear. “He’s encased in some kind of energy bubble. He looks frustrated.”

“Throw Kool-Aid on it,” I said, panting, dodging down a side hallway as electric blasts ripped apart the hallway behind me. Sparks. She was furious.

"I'm aborting the mission," Tia said. "Cody, swing down and pick up David."

"Roger," Cody said. A faint thumping sounded over his communication line—the sound of copter rotors.

"Tia, no!" I said, pushing into a room. I threw my rifle over my shoulder and grabbed a backpack full of water balloons.

"The plan is falling apart," Tia said. "Prof is supposed to be point, David, not you. Besides, you just proved that the balloons didn't work."

I pulled out a balloon and turned, then waited a heartbeat until electricity formed on one of the walls, announcing Sourcefield. She appeared a second later, and I hurled my balloon at her. She cursed and jumped to the side, and red splashed along the wall.

I turned and ran, shoving my way through a door into a bedroom, making for the balcony. "She's afraid of the Kool-Aid, Tia," I said. "My first balloon negated an energy blast. We have the weakness right."

"She still stopped your bullet."

True. I jumped out onto the balcony, looking up for the zip line. It wasn't there.

Tia cursed in my ear. "That's what you were running for? The zip line's two rooms over, you slontze."

Sparks. In my defense, hallways and rooms all look very similar when everything's made of steel.

The thumping copter was near now; Cody had almost arrived. Gritting my teeth, I leaped up onto the rail, then threw myself toward the next balcony over. I caught it by its railing, my rifle swinging over one shoulder, backpack on the other. I climbed up.

"David . . . ," Tia said.

"Primary trap point is still functioning?" I asked, climbing over a few lawn chairs that had been frozen in steel. I reached the other side of the balcony and leaped up onto the railing. "I'll take your silence as a yes," I said, and leaped across.

I hit hard, slamming into the steel railing of the next balcony over. I grabbed one of the bars and looked down—I was dangling twelve stories in the air. I shoved down my worry and, with effort, hauled myself up.

Behind me, Sourcefield peeked out onto the balcony I'd left. I had her scared. Which was good, but also bad. I needed her to be reckless for the next part of our plan to work. That meant provoking her, unfortunately.

I swung up onto the balcony, fished out a Kool-Aid balloon, and lobbed it in her direction. Then, without looking to see if the balloon hit, I jumped onto the railing and grabbed the backpack, flinging it up over the zip line so that the straps hung down on the other side.

I grabbed on and kicked off.

The balcony exploded.

Fortunately, the zip line was affixed to the roof, not the balcony itself, and the line remained firm. Bits of molten metal zipped through the dark air around me as I dropped along the line, picking up speed. Turns out those things are a lot faster than they look. Skyscrapers passed me on either side in a blur. I felt like I was *really* falling.

I managed a shout—half panicked, half ecstatic—before everything lurched around me and I crashed into the ground, rolling on the street.

“Whoa,” I said, pushing myself up. The city spun like a lopsided top. My shoulder hurt, and though I'd heard a crunch as I hit, it hadn't been loud. The protective field Prof had granted me was running out. They could only take so much punishment before he had to replace them.

“David?” Tia said. “Sparks. Sourcefield cut the zip line with one of her shots. That's why you fell at the end.”

“Balloon worked,” a new voice said over the line. Prof. He had

a strong voice, rough but solid. "I'm out. Had to take Abraham's mobile; mine broke in the fighting."

"Jon," Tia said to him, "you weren't supposed to fight her."

"It happened," Prof snapped. "David, you alive?"

"Kind of," I said, stumbling to my feet and picking up the backpack. Red juice drink streamed from the bottom. "Not sure about my balloons, though. Looks like there might be a few casualties."

Prof grunted. "Run for the primary trap point, David."

"Jon," Tia said. "If you're out—"

"Sourcefield ignored me," Prof said. "It's just like before. They don't want to fight me. They just want you, the team. David, you're going to have to be bait. You remember the path?"

"Of course," I said, searching for my rifle.

It lay broken nearby, cracked in half in the middle of the forestock. Sparks. Looked like I'd messed up the trigger guard too. I wouldn't be firing that any time soon. I checked my thigh holster and the handgun there. It seemed good. Well, as good as a handgun can be. I hate the things.

"Flashes in the windows of that apartment complex, moving down," Cody said from the copter. "She's teleporting along the outer wall, heading toward the ground. Chasing you, David."

"Good," Prof said over the line. He seemed entirely too pleased by that. I mean, I knew it was the plan, but still.

I searched in the backpack for an unbroken balloon. I had two left. Lanterns hung from the old, useless streetlamps nearby, giving me light. By it, I caught sight of some faces peeking through windows. The windows had no glass, just old-fashioned wooden shutters we'd cut and placed there.

In assassinating Steelheart, the Reckoners had basically declared all-out war on the Epics. But most people had stayed

here anyway—and others had come. During the months since Steelheart's fall, we'd almost doubled the population of Newcago.

I nodded to those people watching. I wouldn't shoo them back to safety. We, the Reckoners, were their champions—but someday these people would have to stand on their own against the Epics. I wanted them to watch.

"Where is she?" I asked into my mobile.

"Should be coming any moment . . . ," Cody said. The dark shadow of his copter passed overhead. Enforcement—Steelheart's police force—was ours now. Some served the people eagerly; others stayed on because it was what they did. I wasn't sure what I thought of that. Not that I was going to complain, but, well, Enforcement had done its best to kill me on several occasions. You didn't just "get over" something like that.

In fact, they *had* killed Megan. She'd recovered. Mostly. I felt at the gun in my holster. It had been one of hers.

"I'm getting into position," Abraham said.

"David? Any sign of Sourcefield?" Tia asked.

"No," I said, looking down the deserted street. Empty of people, lit by a few lonely lanterns, the city almost felt like it had back in Steelheart's days. Desolate and dark. Where was Sourcefield?

She can teleport through walls, I thought. *What would I do in her case?* We had the tensors, which let us tunnel through basically anything we wanted. What would I do if I had those?

The answer to that was obvious. I'd go down.

She was underneath me.

CHAPTER THREE

“SHE’S gone into the understreets!” I said, pulling out one of my two remaining water balloons. “She’s going to come up near—”

Lightning moved across the street, and a glowing figure shot up through the ground. I cursed, hurling my Kool-Aid balloon, then ran.

I heard it splat, then heard Sourcefield curse. For a moment, no energy blasts tried to fry me, so I assumed that I’d hit.

“I’m going to destroy you, little man!” Sourcefield yelled after me. “I’ll rip you apart like a piece of tissue paper in a hurricane!”

“Wow,” I said, dashing down the street toward the location of the trap.

“What?” Tia asked.

“That was a really good metaphor.” I reached an intersection and took cover by an old mailbox, looking back at Sourcefield.

She strode down the street. Calamity! She was alight; electricity flew from her to the street, to nearby poles, and to the walls of the buildings. Such power. Was this what Edmund would be like, if he weren’t constantly gifting his abilities away?

“I refuse to believe,” the woman shouted, “that you killed Steelheart!”

Just like Mitosis, I thought. He’d been another Epic who had come to Newcago, and had said something similar. They couldn’t accept that one of their most powerful—an Epic even others like Sourcefield had feared—had been killed by common men.

She looked grand, all in black with a fluttering cape, electricity leaping from her in sparks and flashes. Unfortunately, I didn’t need her grand. I needed her *angry*. Some members of Enforcement crept out of a building nearby, carrying assault rifles on their backs and Kool-Aid balloons in their hands. I motioned them toward an alley. They nodded and pulled back to wait.

It was time for me to taunt an Epic.

“I didn’t kill only Steelheart!” I shouted at her. “I’ve killed dozens of Epics. I’ll kill you too!”

An energy blast hit my mailbox. I dove for cover behind a building, and another blast hit the ground only inches from where I crouched. As I brushed the ground with my arm, a shock ran up it, jolting me. I cursed, putting my back to the wall and shaking my hand, then peeked around the side of the building. Sourcefield was running for me.

Great! Also, *terrifying*.

I dashed for a doorway across the street. Sourcefield tore around the corner just as I entered the building.

Inside, a path had been cleared through what had once been some kind of car showroom. I ran straight through it, and Sourcefield followed, teleporting through the front wall at speed.

I dashed through room after room, following the pattern we'd set out earlier.

Right, duck through that room.

Left down a hallway.

Right again.

We'd used another of Prof's powers—the one he disguised as technology called the tensors—to drill doorways for me. Sourcefield followed on my tail, passing through walls in flashes of light. She kept right on me, but I never stayed in her sight long enough for her to get off a good shot. This was perfect. She . . .

. . . she slowed down.

I stopped beside the door out the back of the building, looking down a hallway. Sourcefield stood at the end of it, electricity zipping from her to the steel walls around her.

Calamity! "Tia, you see this?" I whispered.

"Yeah. Looks like something spooked her."

I took a deep breath. It was far less than ideal, but . . . "Abraham," I whispered, "bring the troops in. Full-out attack."

"Agreed," Prof said.

The Enforcement troops who had been lying in wait stormed in through the front of the car dealership building. Others came down the steps from above; I heard their tromping footfalls. Sourcefield glanced back as a pair of soldiers entered the hallway in full gear, with helms and futuristic armor. The fact that they lobbed bright orange water balloons slightly spoiled the coolness of the effect.

Sourcefield laid a hand on the wall beside her, then transformed into electricity and melded into it, disappearing. The balloons broke uselessly on the floor of the corridor.

Sourcefield emerged back into the hallway and released bursts of energy down the corridor. I squeezed my eyes shut as the shots blasted the two soldiers, but I heard their cries.

"This is the best the infamous Reckoners can do?" Sourcefield shouted as more soldiers came in, throwing water balloons from

all directions. I forced myself to watch, pulling out my handgun, as Sourcefield dropped through the floor.

She came up behind a group of soldiers in the middle of the corridor. The men screamed as the electricity took them. I gritted my teeth. If they lived, Prof would be able to heal them under the guise of using "Reckoner technology."

"The balloons aren't working," Tia said.

"They are," I hissed, watching as one hit Sourcefield. Her powers wavered for a moment. I took a shot, as did three Enforcement gunmen who had set up opposite me on the far end of the corridor.

All four bullets hit; all four were caught in her energy field and destroyed. The balloons were working, just not well enough.

"All units on the southern side of the corridor," Abraham's voice said, "pull back. Immediately."

I ducked back as a sudden barrage of bullets shook the building. Abraham, who had set up behind the Enforcement sharpshooters at the far end of the corridor, was unloading with his XM380 gravatonic minigun.

I grabbed my mobile and patched into Abraham's video feed. I could see it from his perspective, gun flashing in the dark, bullet after bullet ricocheting down the steel corridor, throwing sparks. Any that reached Sourcefield *still* got trapped or deflected by her electric field. A group of men and women behind Abraham lobbed balloon after balloon. Above, soldiers pulled back a trapdoor in the ceiling and prepared to dump a bucket of Kool-Aid.

Sourcefield jumped, dodging the Kool-Aid. Then she continued to back away. Step by step, she retreated. She *was* afraid of the stuff, but it wasn't working completely. An Epic's weakness was supposed to negate their powers totally, and this wasn't doing so.

I was pretty sure I knew why.

Sourcefield unleashed a barrage of energy blasts toward Abraham and the others. Abraham cursed and went down, but

his protective field—gifted to him by Prof under the guise of a jacket with a technologic force field—protected him and sheltered the people behind him. I heard groans through the feed, though I couldn't see anything. I turned off the feed.

"You are *nothing!*" Sourcefield shouted.

I strapped the mobile to my arm and looked back around the corner in time to see her sending a wave of electricity through the ceiling toward those above. Screams.

I hefted my last water balloon, then stood up, leaned around the corner, and threw it. It exploded across her back.

Sourcefield spun on me. Sparks! A High Epic in her glory, energy flaring . . . Was it any wonder that these things presumed to rule?

I spat at her feet, then turned and ran.

She shouted after me.

I emerged in the street.

"Upper units, Haven Street," Tia said in my ear, "get ready to lob."

People appeared on the top of the building we'd just left, and they hurled water balloons down as Sourcefield broke out after me. She ignored them, following me. If anything, the falling balloons just made her more mad.

When they splashed near her, however, she stopped shouting.

Right, I thought, sweating, slamming my way into the building across the street. It was a small apartment complex. I ran through the entryway and into the first apartment.

Sourcefield followed in a storm of energy and anger. She didn't stop for walls; she passed through them in flashes of light.

Just a little farther! I urged silently as I shut a door. This complex was populated, and we'd replaced many of the frozen steel doors with wooden ones that worked.

Sourcefield came through the wall as I leaped over a steel

couch and entered the next room—which was pitch black inside. I slammed the door.

The light of Sourcefield entering blinded me. Her aura hit, and suddenly that little shock I'd taken earlier seemed minuscule. Electricity shot through me, causing my muscles to go weak and spasm. I reached to hit the large button on the wall, but my arms weren't working right.

I slammed my face into it instead.

I collapsed then. Fortunately, the ceiling of the small, darkened room—which had once been a bathroom—opened up, dumping several hundred gallons of Kool-Aid down on us. Above that, shower-heads turned on, spraying red liquid.

Sourcefield's energy dampened dramatically. Electricity ran up her arms in little ribbons, but kept shorting out. She reached for the door, but it had locked after me. Cursing, she held up a fist, trying to summon the energy to teleport, but the constant rain of liquid disrupted her powers.

I struggled to my knees.

She turned on me and growled, then seized me by the shoulders.

I reached up, grabbing her mask by the front and yanking it off like a ski mask. It had a plastic piece on the front that obviously fit over the nose and mouth. A filter of some sort?

Beneath the mask, she was a middle-aged woman with curly brown hair. The liquid continued to rain down, and ran in streams across her cheeks and lips. Getting into her mouth.

Her light went out completely.

I groaned, climbing to my feet as Sourcefield shouted in panic, scrambling at the door, rattling it, trying to get it to open. I tapped my mobile, bathing the room in a soft white light.

"I'm sorry," I said, raising Megan's handgun to her head.

Sourcefield looked at me, eyes widening.

I squeezed the trigger. This time, the bullet didn't bounce off. She fell to the ground, and a deeper red liquid began to pool around her, mixing with what was raining down. I lowered the gun.

My name is David Charleston.

I kill people with super powers.

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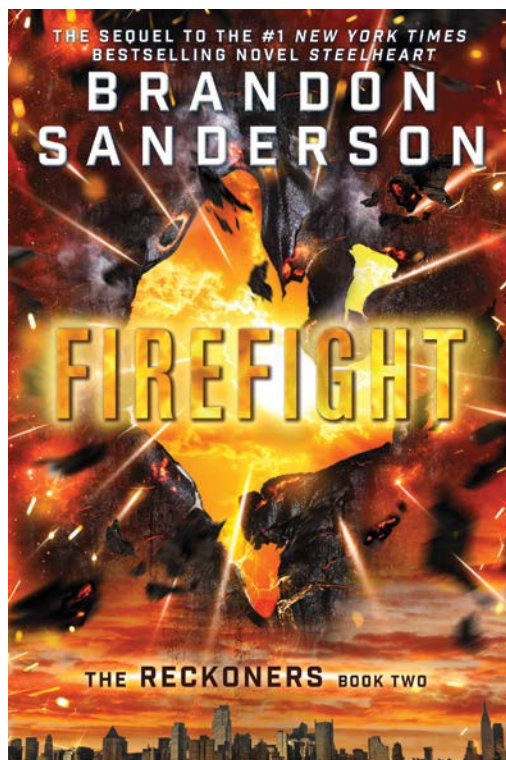
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